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Statement by Carol Tucker Foreman
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Before the Subcommittee on Health and Scientific Research
Committee on Labor and Human Resources
United States Senate
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Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee, the Surgeon General has explained the scientific evidence which supports the Dietary Guidelines. I want to talk about them from the perspective of public policy.

What prompted the two federal departments most concerned with food and health to pool their medical and nutritional knowledge to provide American citizens with dietary guidance? Who said they wanted any? And, even if they did, where is it written that the advice should come from the federal government?

I believe the simplest answer to those questions is that a government of the people -- and that is what we are -- should respond to the concerns of its people.

You won't get much disagreement on that. The debate arises over how government should respond. And when.

It has been a decade since the White House Conference on Food, Nutrition, and Health first focused national attention on food and its relationship to health. In the intervening years, the United States has come a long way in fighting hunger and malnutrition and the diseases related to them. Government food assistance programs, such as Food Stamps, the Supplemental Feeding Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), and School Lunch and Breakfast, are responsible for much of that progress.

We have been less successful with the other side of the equation -- health problems which may be related to overconsumption or inappropriate food choices. The Dietary Guidelines address

those problems. They are a response to the legitimate concern of many American citizens about the food they eat and its effects on their health.

Evidence of that concern is all around us. Last year, the American Family Report, a survey done by Yankelovich, Skelly, and White, revealed that American family members are concerned now about many food products such as cholesterol, fats, and food additives, which did not worry them in the past. The majority of the families surveyed believed overweight to be "a serious health hazard." They were far more concerned with, and conscious of, the need for good nutrition than they had been in the past. And a majority were interested in preventive health care.

Public concern about the safety of food products has risen sharply in recent months. According to a national survey by Consumer Research Corporation, the general level of consumer concern about foods climbed 11% between January and September of 1979. In January, only 38% of those questioned were worried about safety hazards associated with food. By June, the percentage had increased to 45%, and by September, it had reached 49%.

In November, tabulations of mail and telephone calls to Consumer Reports Magazine showed that concerns about food products outnumbered those about automobiles, household cleaning agents, and medical products. It was the first time food had attained that dubious first-place distinction.

Public hearings conducted last year by the Department of Agriculture, the Food and Drug Administration, and the Federal

Trade Commission, showed increased consumer demand for more information on the nutritional composition of processed and packaged foods.

Government has been responding to these concerns. In December, we published preliminary labeling proposals in The Federal Register. The Guidelines are another response. This Subcommittee's scheduled hearings on the companion nutrition labeling bills, S. 1651 and S. 1652, are still another.

I am sure I can speak for Dr. Richmond as well as myself when I welcome this Congressional initiative and support the general concepts of these proposals. We believe that all of these actions will ultimately help the American people make their own informed food choices.

It is not new for government to advise its citizens in an effort to protect their health. Government has been doing it for years. The Recommended Dietary Allowances, originally developed by USDA scientists, are a good example. So are the various USDA publications which give advice on the proper ways to handle and store foods. The information provided to farmers about the best way to sow crops, improve animal feed efficiency, and use pesticides, are other examples. USDA's popular Food book, with suggested menus and recipes, is still another.

So the Guidelines are no great departure from past practice. They are simply the latest effort to provide the American public with a summary of the latest scientific consensus, this one on the relationship of dietary patterns to the risk and incidence of specific chronic diseases.

Government did not rush headlong into the nutritional thicket. The White House Conference, in 1969, recommended that the federal government take action to initiate nutrition education programs for the public.

In 1978, USDA and the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare formed a Joint Informal Coordinating Committee to address issues of mutual concern in human nutrition. The Committee is composed of the Surgeon General, the Director of the National Institutes of Health, and the Commissioner of the Food and Drug Administration, representing HEW; and from USDA, the Assistant Secretary for Food and Consumer Services, the Director of Science and Education, and the Director of the Human Nutrition Center. Nutrition policy coordinators from both departments also sit on the Committee.

This committee appointed a task force of scientists from the two departments and instructed it to translate current scientific knowledge, on which there was consensus, into general dietary guidance for the public.

The Dietary Guidelines are the result. In developing them, the task force, of course, consulted other scientific bodies. Among them were the consensus papers of the American Society for Clinical Nutrition, which were issued last May after an exhaustive, four-way study on the strength of association between dietary factors and prevalent chronic disease.

The association found four correlations to be of considerable strength. The strongest association was the relationship of alcohol consumption to liver disease. The second was between sugar and dental cavities. The third showed a relationship between salt and hypertension. The fourth showed a relationship between cholesterol and saturated fat and coronary artery disease.

Also reviewed were the conclusions of the special scientific committee of the Federation of American Societies for Experimental Biology, commissioned by FDA to study salt in the diet. Statements by the American Academy of Pediatrics and the National Cancer Institute were also used as sources. So was Healthy People, the Surgeon General's Report on Disease Prevention and Health Promotion.

I think it is important to note that these scientists have no product to sell, nor any particular hypothesis to protect or promote. It could even be argued that their own purposes would be better served by not taking a position. At a time when funds for basic research -- or anything else -- are hard to come by, they might well have concluded that it was the better part of wisdom to plead ignorance and say that the diet-disease controversy needs further study.

No doubt it does. But the Guidelines do not tug at the frontiers of knowledge. They are firmly grounded in the largely undisputed territory of nutrition science. They contain fundamental concepts and practical advice. They are neither a medical prescription nor a nutritional insurance policy. They are simple recommendations which people can use, if they choose, without

making drastic changes in their life styles or food preferences.

While the Guidelines are neither law nor regulation, but advice, they do reflect a very serious concern: the promotion of health and the prevention or reduction of killer diseases, some of which have reached epidemic proportions in this country.

It is true, unfortunately, that right now we lack the technological sophistication to predict and/or identify those specific individuals who risk developing such diseases. However, there is not one shred of evidence or research that indicates following the recommendations of the Guidelines will do harm to anyone. No research indicates that a diet low in salt, sugar, and fat is harmful. On the other hand, these Guidelines may well help those who choose to follow them, regardless of their risk status.

Government can do more than provide advice and information. It can and should follow the most prudent course in its functions as supplier and regulator.

We have no intention of telling the American people to "Do as we say, don't do as we do." We are doing. We spend roughly \$3 billion of Federal tax dollars on the child and elderly nutrition programs each year. The government purchases directly more than \$800 million worth of food for these programs annually.

We have reduced the fat content in our ground beef purchases from 28 to 22%. Last year, we purchased fruits packed in light, rather than heavy, syrup. This year, we will make it available packed in its own juice. For the first time, we have purchased fresh fruits for use in the school feeding programs. And we are testing the acceptability of vegetables canned with only 1% salt.

The Department also sets certain standards which must be met in these feeding programs. In this area, too, we are attempting to follow good dietary advice. School lunch and breakfast regulations now in effect recommend that schools attempt to reduce salt, sugar, and fat in these meals. We require that schools offer a low fat milk to students, in addition to whole milk.

We have followed the directive of Congress and issued a final regulation setting minimum nutritional standards for foods sold in competition with school meals. And we have proposed changes in the food packages for participants in the Women, Infants, and Children's Supplemental Feeding Program.

In addition, this year USDA will spend more than \$100 million to transmit nutrition information, both to the general public and to specific target groups served by our food assistance programs.

Thousands of American families are offered assistance in improving their diets and getting the most from their food dollar expenditures through the Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program, and the Cooperative Extension Services in the states.

Our Nutrition Education and Training Programs offer nutrition information to school teachers and food service personnel so that the school feeding programs can be learning experiences in nutrition. We are working with the National Congress of Parents and Teachers to develop pilot programs for increasing parent and student involvement with school feeding programs.

The Department will continue to develop informational materials for use by the general public. The Guidelines themselves will be distributed by the Extension Services, which operate in 3,100 counties across the country. They will also be used by the nutrition education personnel in the Food Stamp, Child Nutrition, and WIC Programs. These nutritionists may adapt the information to fit their specific education programs or, in some cases, distribute copies of the guidelines directly.

HEW will distribute the Guidelines through state, county, and local Public Health Departments. They will be available to individual health professionals and professional organizations in the health field. 100,000 copies will be available directly to the public through the Consumer Information Center in Pueblo, Colorado.

USDA's Human Nutrition Center, created in 1978 and directed by Dr. Mark Hegsted, will soon publish a series of suggested menu guides to assist those citizens who wish to put the Guidelines into practice. The Center is also working on a second edition of the Food book, which will deal with the reduction of fats, sugar, and salt, and an increase of fiber, in the diet.

Few people quarrel with better information, more stringent requirements on federally-funded regulatory and purchasing programs, and requirements for better labels.

But government is not the only actor here. The food industry is on the threshold of a major decision, and it may be the most important decision on this entire issue. That decision is whether to stand pat and greet every new piece of information which comes from the government as another outbreak of national nanny-itis,

or to turn the information into a major marketing strategy. There are encouraging indications that many businesses will choose the latter course.

The Food Marketing Institute has endorsed the Guidelines and has done an outstanding job of disseminating nutritional information throughout the food industry.

Several supermarket chains have seized the initiative by offering nutrition and health information programs, ranging from the provision of nutrition information, to broader activities which address shopping and meal habits, diet, exercise, and life style.

For example, Giant Food, in cooperation with the Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute of the National Institutes of Health, is conducting a pilot nutrition information program which focuses primarily on heart health. The Giant program concentrates on cholesterol, fats, and salt, but it does touch on sugars and general nutrition information.

Also, two New York grocery chains, in cooperation with the Cooperative Extension Service of Cornell University, have a nutrition education pilot project underway to study how consumer food choices are influenced by a variety of nutrition education methods.

Food processors are not ignoring the public concern over diet either. Hormel and Oscar Meyer have test-marketed a low-fat frankfurter. I hope others will follow their lead. I believe that as Americans become more and more food conscious, there will be an ever-expanding market for

food products that are low in fat, sugar, and salt. The industry has taken such initiatives in the past. They developed enriched flour, and poly-unsaturated margarines. They reduced the lard weight in pork, and packed fruit in its own juice. An average of 2,000 new products fill the supermarket shelves each year. More than half the products there now didn't exist 30 years ago.

In closing, Mr. Chairman, let me say that in spite of these positive developments, we are aware that there are those who would have preferred that the publication of the Guidelines await absolute, iron-clad scientific unanimity. Well, we could have awaited unanimity, instead of accepting consensus. We could also have waited for the millenium to dawn, for the cows to come home, and for the moon to be made of green cheese.

But we feel that offering dietary guidance to the public is an appropriate and important response by government to increasing public concern about the relationship between diet and disease. For too long -- certainly since the publication of the Dietary Goals by the Senate Select Committee on Nutrition and Human Needs -- the nutritional wars have been fought on a battleground littered with milligrams, micro-nutrients, decimal points, and biochemical breakdowns.

That's fine for the scientists and nutritionists, but it does precious little for the eaters. People eat every day. They want relatively simple, easy-to-use guidance based on the best available information.

That is what the Guidelines give. I believe they will be helpful to the millions of healthy Americans who have more than a passing interest in staying that way.

Finally, I cannot tell you that scientific consensus on these issues will never change. No one can. Nutrition is an evolving science. But certainly we do not expect to alter the Guidelines tomorrow. We do stand ready to accept the advice and counsel of our scientists; to use that counsel in food purchasing, food regulation, and nutrition education, and to make changes in all those areas when scientific judgement tells us that we should.

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